

DOCTORAL THESIS

Children's Perceptions of Beauty Exploring aesthetic experience through photography

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Abstract

The research reported in this thesis explores children's perceptions of beauty. It investigates how children reflect upon and articulate their perceptions of beauty and examines how these perceptions relate to philosophical thinking about aesthetic experience.

For the past 100 years, beauty has been marginalised in art and education and it is widely regarded as a problematic notion in a range of social and cultural contexts. Art educators have often portrayed beauty as a peripheral concern, and those who have studied children's responses to artworks have tended to characterise their references to beauty as evidence of passive appreciation and a relatively low level of aesthetic development. In recent years there has been growing evidence of a revival of interest in beauty as a theme for reflection; however, to my knowledge, this is the first study to specifically research children's perceptions of beauty.

The theoretical part of the study examined two fields of literature, in terms of (i) art educators' strategies for engaging children with art and (ii) philosophical theories of aesthetic experience. These sources influenced the design of the empirical part of the study, which consisted of 18 group interviews with 51 children aged 9-11 in two schools, one in inner London and the other in a rural village 40 miles from the capital. Before the interviews children completed two tasks independently in which they found and photographed images they thought were beautiful. Therefore there were two kinds of research data: (i) the images children found and photographed and (ii) the interview transcripts. A content analysis approach informed the interpretation of the images, while a number of themes that emerged from the interview data were identified and discussed in the context of the literature.

The research findings indicated that children have diverse perceptions of beauty and that they are interested in a range of visual properties and expressive qualities of images. Children in one school tended to find beauty in images that reflected relationships, while those in the other judged the subjective nature of such images to be problematic. Children in the rural area often photographed landscapes, flowers and animals, suggesting their direct connection with nature influences their perception of it as beautiful. Those in London also found beauty in the natural world but preferred stylised, digitally generated representations of nature designed to appeal to the viewer.

During the interviews children were often highly motivated to articulate their responses to beauty, and many reflected thoughtfully on their own and others' images. Evidence suggests that children experience beauty in a wide range of contexts and that they variously understand it as an intersubjectively valid, shareable experience or, alternatively, as an individual experience. Several talked about beauty in ways that related to notions well-rehearsed in aesthetic theory while others, though less able to conceive or articulate such ideas, were nonetheless receptive to them when they heard them expressed. Photography played an important part in the research, and the findings suggest the medium has the potential to play a far more prominent role in art education as a means of expression. When combined with group interviews, photography can also be a highly effective method of understanding children's perspectives on their experiences, and the study offers a useful model for researchers and educators to develop further.

The research makes several contributions to knowledge. Firstly, it demonstrates that children's experiences of beauty are often valuable and meaningful to them. Secondly, it provides evidence that children are motivated to explain their ideas about beauty and to engage with the ideas of others. Thirdly, it challenges previous assumptions in terms of both children's aesthetic development and aesthetic preferences by highlighting the diversity and complexity of children's perceptions of beauty.

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This dissertation has 97,542 words; excluding the front matter, figures and back matter.

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